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Step and Single Parent Families

As a young child, I was playing house with my grandmother one day. Because there were no boys around at the time, I suggested we pretend that our father had died, which would explain why only we as the mother and daughter were in the game. I will never forget how forcefully my grandmother rejected my suggestion. But it was only as an adult and a stepmother that I began to understand what lay behind that force. My grandmother had lost her first husband as a young woman with three small children. She only married my stepgrandfather after her children were grown.

Step and single parent families have always been among the family configurations of our society. For those of us with an interest in genealogy, a quick look back through the records of our extended families reveals case after case where death, second and third marriages, stepchildren, and half siblings occur. In our own time, divorce or abandonment by a spouse may be just as likely to radically change the nature of family groups. *The Mennonite Mosaic*, published in 1989, showed a 4.2 percent divorce rate among all Mennonites. Recent research by Mennonite Media Ministries indicates that 9.2 percent of new people joining Mennonite churches are divorced or separated (Davis, p. 9).

The most defining factor that shapes step and single parent families is that they come into being after many losses and changes (Visher and Visher, 10). Thus grief, whether conscious or unconscious, is a strong thread woven into such families' identity. The grief over death of a spouse and parent may be obvious, but the grief over the loss of a marriage dream turned into a nightmare, and the grief over parents who through remarriage or the permanent absence of the divorced spouse will never again be reconciled can be equally strong. There are also changes in or loss of familiar living spaces, understood and accepted ways of doing things, and the desired amount of time and attention in specific relationships of the family group.

Negative evaluations of step and single parent families by society at large add to the burden these families need to overcome in our movement toward whole and healthy relationships. Mennonite tradition has at times contributed its own lore to the negative images of stepfamilies. A recent

book on Mennonite furniture describes the letter of a Mennonite grandmother passing on her dowry chest to her granddaughter with a wish that "no one will have misfortune because of it," and suggests that her reference may be to an "evil stepmother who would lure the innocent stepchild to the chest and drop the lid on its head, only to feign tearful sorrow to the father" (Janzen and Janzen, 38).

The articles in this issue point to other negative evaluations, many of which may be more prevalent in the church than in society at large. These include the stigma of divorce, the critique of remarriage after divorce, the sense that a single parent family is incomplete, and the expectation that families built out of remarriage should settle down and be normal like all other families.

Step and single parent families give rise to important issues for each of their members, resident and adult children as well as resident and nonresident parents of both sexes. There are particularly significant issues for women. Economic concerns of widowed and divorced women are underlined in two of our stories. The deep pain of relational struggles are noted by women in several others. Visher and Visher note that women often have greater difficulty in stepfamilies because of "expectations that women are the ones who are primarily



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responsible for the ambience of the home and the care of the children, including stepchildren...(and because) many women still derive much of their self-esteem from their role as parents" (19).

Some of the people I invited to contribute stories for this issue turned down my request, feeling that it would not be fair to parade their family struggles in front of others. A number of those whose stories you are about to read talked to me several times about how difficult it was to write them. My own mental writing of this introduction changed several times during the birthing of this issue as incidents in my family buffeted or bolstered my emotions.

Yet working on this issue, talking with the other writers and reading and rereading their stories was a hopeful experience for me. I believe strongly that step and single parent families can be real, normal and good families, even though they will never be families just like first-undissolved-marriage nuclear families. Our hope in sharing these stories is that others whose family structures are different from ours may acknowledge our place with them in the broad family of the church. In our growing, struggles, and love we, together with adoptive families, offer small but visible models of God's reign, which is not based on blood ties, clan or race, but on commitment to those who are different from us out of love and through the strength of God who sustains us.

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by Heather Block

The Tightrope

"What am I, the ugly stepchild?" one of my co-workers muttered, feeling she had been mistreated. The question made me uneasy because of its assumption that stepchildren are the ones who get walked on. The question also made me uneasy because it reminded me of the tightrope I sometimes seem to be walking on—caught between being honest about the dynamics of being part of a stepfamily (positive and difficult) and feeling that I must defend the stepfamily (especially my stepmother) from all the horrible myths and connotations that go with that word. I find myself on that same tightrope as I begin writing about my experiences.

Perhaps that tightrope is one of the most outstanding aspects of being a stepchild, but I prefer not to think of that fact being the primary dynamic in our family and I don't believe it is. I generally only use the term "stepmother" when I need to differentiate my second mother from my birthmother. Yet the fact that I have two mothers—one who gave birth to me and raised me the first nine years of my life and the other who has raised me since I was eleven—means I cannot ignore this part of my life.

I wonder if that tightrope was ever absent. I remember when Dad asked us what we would think if he married Gladys. Although my social work training says one should never do that, I appreciated being able to respond to the question. My response is still clear to me, although my siblings don't remember it. I asked if Grandma Neumann (my mother's mother) would still be my grandmother. Reassured that my birthmother's family would not be cut off, I said that I was happy with the plan.

I remember Dad telling us that we had to call Gladys "Mom" (another social work no-no and another tightrope issue). Calling her Mom gave Gladys a definite place in our family and a definite right to parent us. It affirmed the relationship. But the change was difficult for me. Up until then she had been Gladys to us and the word "Mom" had belonged to my birthmother. In order to resolve the issue, I promised myself that I could call Gladys "Mom" but she would never be "Mommy". That term was reserved for my first mother. The relationship with Gladys was further affirmed when she adopted us. Because I was 12 when the paperwork came through I had to sign the adoption papers. I remember Dad



apologizing that I had to do so, but I appreciated the opportunity to see that as my own choice.

The incident that most exhibits the tightrope occurred when Gladys had been a part of our family for about a year and a half. I had had an argument with Mom that particular morning before going to meet some of my friends. In the course of my afternoon with my friends, one of them asked who I preferred, my first mother or my stepmother. It was a horrible question and I really felt caught. If I said my first mother (and I felt tempted to, due to the argument that morning), then I would be betraying my stepmother and adding to people's beliefs about stepmothers. If I said my stepmother (which I was tempted to do in order to be loyal to the woman who was now my mother), I would be betraying my birthmother and there was no way I could do that. I think I just said that I did not know what my first mom would be like at this age, so there was no way I could compare.

In many ways our family fell into the routines and patterns of a "normal" nuclear family, but it wasn't without its adjustments. Many things that had not been important before were now attended to. I remember when I was "motherless" walking to school with a friend of mine. We both hated wearing skirts, but her mother had made her wear one. She told me that I was lucky I did not have a mother to make me wear a skirt, and I agreed with her. After Dad and Mom's wedding, I once again found myself in the same position as my friends—sometimes wearing a skirt to school. We previously had someone come into the house a couple of

times a week to do housekeeping. Now we found that luxury gone. It was a shock for all of our systems. Mom found herself with three children who could not make a bed. We found ourselves picking up tasks someone else had done until then. I sometimes wonder now if we had expected her to do what the woman who did the housekeeping had done.

The other outstanding adjustment incident had to do with peanut butter cookies. Shortly after moving into our house, Mom made peanut butter cookies—the one kind I wouldn't eat. I blurted out that I did not like them. I remember Mom being quite hurt since she had thought she was doing something special for us.

After we had more or less adjusted to the change in our lives, I guess the major question, in looking back, had to do with learning and talking about our birthmother. Here again we walked a tightrope. Our very existence is an affirmation of her life. We each received one of her rings, which my sister and I still wear. Our stepmother helped Dad sort through our birthmother's belongings and we each received some of them (artwork she had done, china, silverware, diaries). She had written a book which Dad published after her death. While we treasured these things, we neither could nor wanted to use these memories to deny the importance of our stepmother. We were never sure how to ask about our birthmother in order to find out more about her, wondering if doing so would make our current mother feel less important. To lessen the tension we sometimes chose not to ask. I am not sure whether we made the right choice or even if our interpretation was the same as Dad and Mom's.

"I do not think that there is a correct way for a family with a stepparent to develop into a cohesive family."

I do not think that there is a correct way for a family with a stepparent to develop into a cohesive family. I have found it interesting to talk with friends of mine whose mothers have died and fathers remarried to see how their families have responded to the transition. It has also been interesting to study stepfamilies and learn how some of the dynamics in our family were a part of being in a stepfamily.

Our family never focused on the fact that we were a stepfamily. Our stepmother was Mom and much more real sometimes than our birthmother. When we had arguments during my teen years I did not see them as being a result of her being a stepmother but as a natural result of being two different individuals, one of which was becoming more independent. I always felt that she loved me as if she had given birth to me. Perhaps we leaned too heavily to that side of the tightrope and did not allow ourselves to explore what it means to be in a stepfamily. Maybe we did it right for our family.

My experience of walking a tightrope has carried into writing this story. Because we did not focus on our status as a stepfamily, I have difficulty knowing which of the dynamics in our family are a result of being a stepfamily and which of them are relationship issues common to any family. As I mentioned earlier, I have viewed any disagreements as being a part of family and personal development and a result for the combination of personalities in our family. However, I also suspect that the combination of people may be more compatible when all the children come from the same "gene pool".

There have also been times when I have wondered if saying I love and miss my birthmother means that my stepmother is not good enough. Does expressing love for my stepmother lessen my love for my birthmother? Does talking about the struggles imply that there were only struggles and negate the positives? Does talking about the positives ignore or prevent me from seeing which aspects of our family reflect being part of a stepfamily?

I do not think so. I recently heard a sentence which meant a lot to me: "No matter what fills the gap, it remains something different." That sentence means that it is okay to miss my birthmother. It means that it is okay to love my stepmother. It means that both women have distinct and important roles in my life. It means that it is okay and natural to walk the tightrope.

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by Jan and Gary Chard

A Couple's Story: Jan

I was raised in a stepfamily. My mother remarried when I was an adolescent and I was fortunate enough to develop a good relationship with my new stepfather. Up until that time my brother and I had resided in a single-parent home. I had not had the opportunity to develop any solid interaction with an adult male and I feel blessed that for a few short years this was possible. My "Dad" died when I was 21.

I feel those years in a stepfamily developed in me a positive attitude toward this family system. My parent's relationship produced a younger half brother. The presence of a new sibling helped our family to bond. Although my memories are positive, our family was not without problems. My biological brother and stepfather never developed a method of communication, and because life was hard for him my brother chose to leave home at 17.

My "Dad" was a strong support for me. He appreciated my strengths and dealt with me in a kind, loving way. Whenever conflict arose, "Dad" let me know that my opinions were respected. The bottom line I think was that I knew he loved me unconditionally. Why did this happen or what was the magic formula? I wish I knew!

"Stepfamilies are born of loss. Many times the grieving involved has not been accomplished before the new family is formed."

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These experiences were important to me. They gave me a perspective on stepfamilies that many people would not have had. Many years later when my life journey led me to make a decision concerning blending two families, I did not feel that this task was beyond me. After all, I said: "I have been a part of a stepfamily before" and "I had a stepparent" and "I was a teacher and loved children." This would be like falling off a log. After spending time with a child, whether yours or not, love would just develop—wouldn't it?

The dynamics within a stepfamily are extremely confusing. It is difficult to accurately verbalize the complexities. Initially, expectations are usually high. The realities can be devastating or the dynamics can be positive and results satisfying. Many factors come into play. Often couples feel little of the control that is evident in a "normal" or "nuclear" family. Different value systems, histories, family backgrounds and experiences all impact on the success of the newly-formed union. After years of working with stepfamilies and hearing the same stories over and over again, I still do not know what makes some bond and others remain single units living in the same household. What I do know is that this family system requires constant dedication and communication.

Stepfamilies are born of loss. Many times the grieving involved has not been accomplished before the new family is formed. Often it is the adults who choose to create a new household without the complete consent of the children involved. This reality is unquestionably a mine field. Clashing of values can occur daily. Resentments and hidden hurts may arise from an innocent comment or action. Many gaps are present in relationships. Often children struggle with divided loyalties.

Both my husband Gary and I feel that it is imperative for people to have an understanding of the pitfalls and potentials involved *before* recoupling. This education does not necessarily guarantee the success of the stepfamily, but it helps couples develop a norm for this type of household. It is impossible to recreate the nuclear family!

Society and the church can have a strong impact on the outcome. As in any family system today, the stepfamily needs support. When Gary and I married we were fortunate to have both family and church support. We belonged to a caring church community and generally felt accepted even though we were aware that not all members felt comfortable with remarriage following divorce. Both of us were nonethnic Mennonites who decided to join the church partially because of the acceptance we felt in this church environment. I know

from personal experience how vulnerable and apart one can feel when functioning in a "different" family. It is so important for the church to be inclusive and welcoming to couples who are feeling societal stigma, stepfamilies being one of these groups.

These past 10 years have been some of the most difficult ones of my life. Presently living in a household with four adolescents (Gary's two children came to live with us three years ago), we deal with constantly arising issues. My two children have accepted Gary. Their relationship with him is natural and satisfying. I feel his daughter and I have developed a loving understanding. His son and I, however, have deep difficulties. Our relationship is civil but quite emotionally exhausting. I have agonized, struggled and prayed my way through, but we have just not connected. This is very painful for me, but having spoken to many others in this situation, I learned that it is not uncommon. I can just hope that time, growth and eventually some distance will enable us to relate.

Our family has had many spontaneous, joyous moments and I relish these times. Somehow they make all of the work and effort worthwhile. I pray for more such times in the future. I also hope that our struggles have modeled for our children the necessity for commitment and communication in relationships.

A Couple's Story: Gary

I was raised in a traditional nuclear family. As a child I was blessed with loving parents, had good relations with my younger brother and sister, and experienced life pretty routinely. My educational training led me into teaching. I married, fathered two good kids, and was on the way to recreating the "happy" family of my childhood.

Ten years later I am still trying to recreate that happy family of my childhood except that I am divorced, remarried and living in a stepfamily.

My wife Jan and I entered our second marriage with high hopes and great confidence that we would be able to create an ideal family situation for our four children (each of us has two). We were determined not to repeat the mistakes we had made in our first marriages. We felt our bond as a couple was strong and that we shared the same beliefs and values. All in all the future looked promising!

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There certainly was a honeymoon period where we felt confident that our love for one another could conquer all. However, living this myth soon came to an end. Many issues confronted us. We were both stepparents for the first time. How does one stepparent effectively? I was missing my two children tremendously, since I saw them only every Thursday after school and every other weekend. I felt very disloyal to them when trying to parent my wife's children. What would my children think? How must they be feeling about the relationship?

Jan and I struggled to meet the needs of our children, who had to move between two homes and two communities. We wanted them to maintain good relations with their biological parents. As stepparents we tried hard not to replace those parents. On the other hand, our relationships with their parents were often very strained. All of our time as a couple was being devoted to dealing with crisis after crisis. Our lives were becoming emotional roller coasters. We needed support and began to reach out for it. As educators, we naturally turned to our public library to search out all the current research and books on the stepfamily topic. To our chagrin, we discovered that very few resources existed.

We next turned to the counselling field and were very fortunate to contact Susan Anderson, at the time a counsellor with Family and Children's Services in Cambridge, Ont. Attending counselling sessions weekly was a lifesaver for us as a couple and for our stepfamily. We began to get some perspective on our difficulties. We both felt reassured that with knowledge gained and support we could be successful in this new family structure.

A short time later, Jan and I attended a day-long workshop in Toronto led by Emily and John Visher, co-founders of the Stepfamily Association of America, about whom we had read while doing some research earlier. This workshop gave us much hope and enthusiasm. We again realized that our stepfamily was going through normal phases in development and that our problems were not unique but common in this type of family.

As a result Jan and I decided to reach out to others who were struggling as we were. We decided to begin what we called a blended family support group. We began with four couples and met every other week. Our good friend and counsellor Susan Anderson acted as facilitator as we began our group. Our group is still intact after seven years, although we meet mainly for social reasons at present. For individuals that are recoupled with children living in a stepfamily, Jan and I highly recommend a support group structure. It is therapeutic

for all concerned to be able to share frustrations and successes with those individuals who are going through the same trials and tribulations in stepfamily life. It can significantly increase understanding of and commitment to the stepfamily.

Since forming our first support group we have been able to offer two six-session courses on stepfamily survival for couples who are anticipating being in a stepfamily or who are presently in one. The courses focus on stepfamily structure and characteristics, the stepparent role, stepchildren, couple communication and strengthening the couple bond. These courses have spawned one other support group. This group at present meets weekly.

In our experience over the years it has become clear to Jan and me how challenging it is to have what people would call an ideal relationship or marriage. Some research indicates that only 5 percent of all relationships fall into this category. We believe that those individuals considering recoupling take time to assess why their previous relationship failed. In many situations professional help should be considered. Becoming aware of one's own personal needs and motivations and solving one's own individual problems before entering into a new relationship will better allow for successful relationships in the future.

In the end, what determines the success of the stepfamily is the strength of the couple bond. If each individual has not done his/her personal work and the couple has not done its couple or marriage work, the stepfamily will have limited success or will eventually break down. With a commitment by the couple to strengthening and enriching the couple bond, the stepfamily with all its complications, as well as any family, can be a safe haven for adults and children to receive the needed nurturing and support to grow into healthy, capable, responsible human beings.

Recommendations for Stepouples

1. Seek out counselling assistance (individual and couple).
2. Check locally for courses on stepfamily living.
3. Begin a support group.
4. Check out programs for children (dealing with parental separation and divorce).
5. Enroll in marital enrichment courses or couple communication courses.

Jan and Gary Chard, teacher and principal respectively with the Waterloo County Board of Education, live in Waterloo, Ont. They are a remarried couple who have been involved in teaching stepfamily courses and facilitating stepfamily support groups.

by Randall Martin

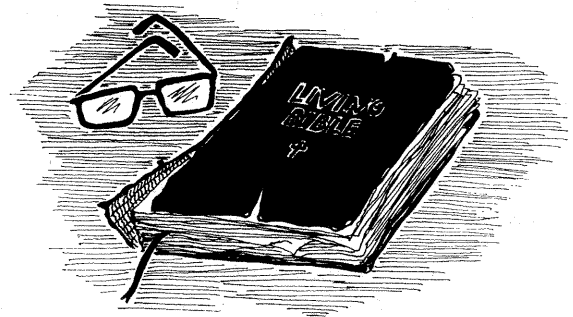
Learnings out of Loss

I was about nine or ten when my father came home from work as a long-distance truck driver to tell me and my sister that he was leaving our family. "I don't love your mother as much as I did at one time," he told us. At age nine, I did not understand how that happens nor how love necessarily determines whether my father is part of our family. I tried all kinds of reasoning and pleading to change his mind. Maybe he could get a new job where he would not be away as much. I looked in the newspaper for jobs. That did not seem to work. Maybe he could tell the other lady that he was staying with us instead of going with her. That did not work either. In the end, he left and that was that.

How does a little boy feel when his father says he is leaving the family? Certainly I was disappointed and sad. But he was never at home anyway, so life did not change very much. About the only difference I could tell after a time was that we had less money in our family. I still wanted my family to be like other families. No one else that I knew was without a father. And *no one* in our Mennonite church had divorced parents! Neither did any of my cousins, who were Mennonites also. Yes, my family was different and I knew it. Surely God would bring my father back. So we prayed. We knelt beside my mother's bed night after night and prayed and prayed asking God to bring Daddy back home. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and months to years but nothing changed. Surely it was the right thing for my father to come home. Didn't God hear? Now I know he did. But at 9 or 10 or 11 years old, I did not understand the workings of God's will and our own free will.

My mother was a strong woman to me. I felt safe with her because she always seemed to know what to do. I began to notice her green Living Bible looking a lot more worn. The gold lettering faded and wore off so only the indentations of the letters remained. Then the padded covers flattened out and the pages dog-eared. Years later the bindings gave way. The pages just slipped inside the covers. Years passed before I really understood how that example of searching the Scriptures and trusting in the Lord would influence my life and how I would lead my own family.

By the standard of most around us, we were poor. But we had a house and an old blue Ford with the paint peeling off. I was



embarrassed many times by our old car. But I remember Mother citing the example of the children of Israel in the wilderness. For 40 years they wandered in the desert, but their clothes and sandals did not wear out. Surely God could make our old car and our old house last too. It seemed a little farfetched to my young mind, but I trusted her. God was faithful. Our cars ran and ran, rarely breaking down. Our house stood firm. In many ways we saw the glory of God, who provided when we had need. I learned a lot about God's faithfulness during those years.

Mother would tell us about Philippians 4:11 where it said to be content in whatever circumstances, or Romans 8:28 which told us that all things work together for the good of those who love God. But most of all I learned from Psalm 20:8: "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God." We had no chariots or horses to trust in. Praise God, who was and is trustworthy.

We prayed about everything—our food, our clothes, our house, our car, and our family and friends. Matthew 7:7 was quoted often: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." And when times seemed most discouraging, we learned to remember Philippians 4:13 "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

These are powerful lessons to learn in life. I reflect many times about how thankful I am that Mother believed in God's faithfulness and taught these things to us. With such strength and faith, how could a little boy not feel secure? Most importantly, these lessons of faithfulness have carried me through life. God has greatly blessed my life and family and I have not experienced the same difficulties in my adult life as my mother. But I know from where these blessings flow!

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"One of the tragedies of life today for young boys growing up to be young men and fathers is the loss of good male role models."

God moved in many ways beside material matters in our life. Faithful church people, friends and family were an important part of life. After my father left, my friends remained from Sunday school and house church. What tremendous support these people were! We were included in church activities and family gatherings. Mother loved having company at our house, and we had plenty. Anything could be a reason for a party. Just to have friends around was reason enough. I give Mother credit for maintaining social contact and not allowing the change in family situation to interrupt our family and church contacts. In fact I believe it is particularly necessary to maintain these ties in times of trouble and change.

A particularly positive aspect of our family situation was that Mother's business was based in our home. Her independence allowed our family to enjoy activities together without the constraints of job schedules. While the monetary rewards of the business were small, the intangible rewards were great. I have fond memories of coming home from school and running downstairs to her shop to tell all about the special happenings of school. I remember the trips to visit relatives in the summer which were not restricted by work schedules to weekends. I truly believe God used Mother's business for our benefit as a family. Freedom from rigid work schedules would enhance the relationship of both single and dual-parent families.

For me, a growing boy, it always felt awkward to never have a dad to go on weekend Boy Scout campouts, attend father and son banquets at church or give a screwdriver to on Father's Day. More than that, I missed not working beside my father around the house on weekends, going to ball games, or any of the activities I saw friends and neighbors doing with their fathers.

I am most grateful for a very loving and caring grandfather. I learned about climbing ladders, installing window panes, painting houses, and driving tractors. He was one of the most special people in my life. I am thankful for the years we had together. I wish all boys without fathers had a grandfather like mine for positive role models. In addition, there were a couple men in our house church who served as positive role models as Sunday school teachers and close friends. These men meant more to me than they will ever know. I would encourage other men today to follow in their footsteps. One of the tragedies of life today for young boys growing up to be young men and fathers is the loss of good male role models.

I have struggled for the past 11 years learning what it means to be a godly, loving husband and father. There is no more important calling for me. Without the daily example of a mother and father, I lost the picture of the husband/wife and father/child relationship. There is hope in the example relationship exhibited between God and Jesus Christ. Both the Old and New Testaments offer guidance on being a godly father and husband. The church should also strengthen its ministry to members of single-parent families. Many people can be ministers without knowing it by reaching out to families who are different.

Through all these experiences of my life I have developed a spirit of independence and a drive to achieve God's best in me. Mother always encouraged us to do the best we could no matter what our circumstances. Why does life's path go one way for some and another for others? God's plan is not always evident to us. I learned to trust in God's faithfulness to meet my need. Perhaps it can best be summed up by the words of Isaiah 40: 28-31: "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power for the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and the young stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

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by Janet Liechty

Stepfamily Ghosts

Most stepfamilies form by remarriage after divorce, but this is not the only route to stepfamilyhood. In 1988, widowhood accounted for five percent of dissolved first marriages of women ages 15-44 (Chadwick and Heaton, 85); when widows with children remarry, a stepfamily is born.

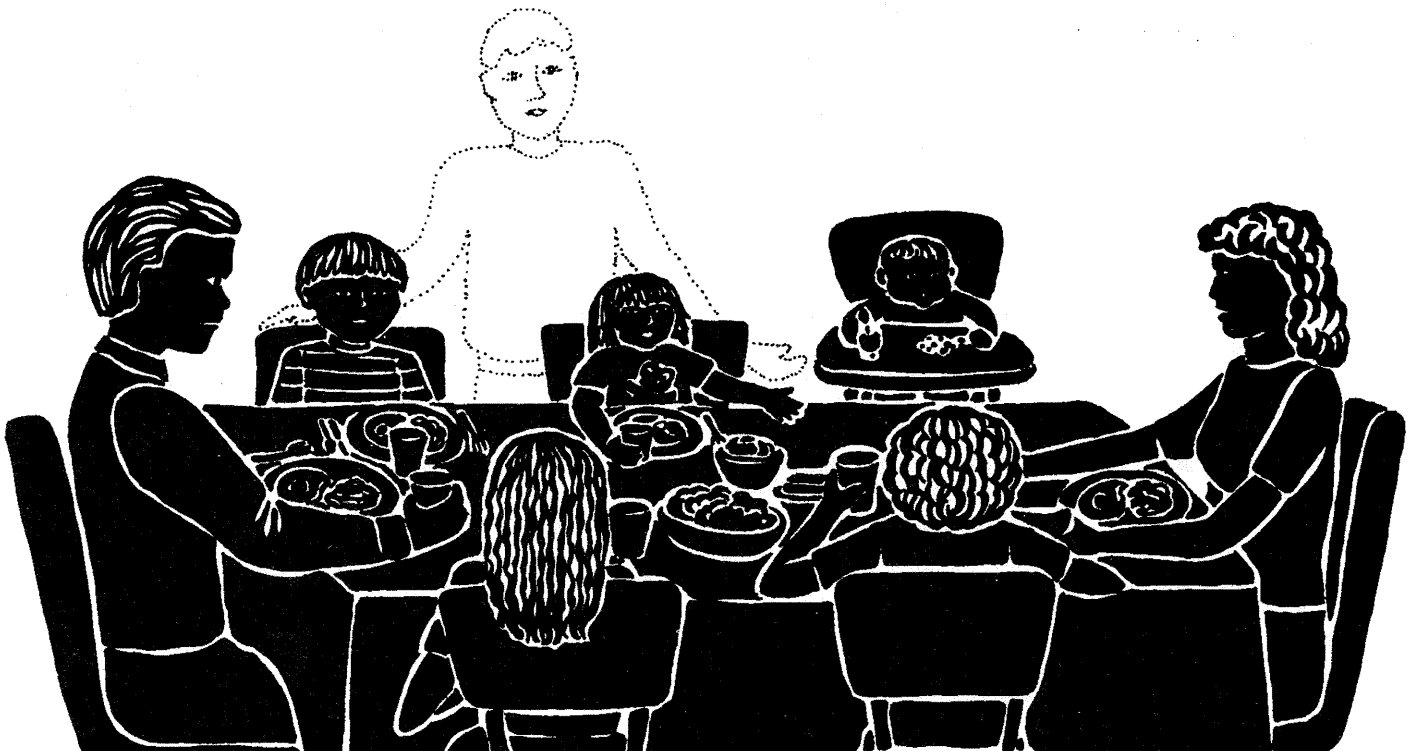
The dynamics involved with a death of a spouse are different than with divorce, and influence the journey of the stepfamily. The primary difference is that after divorce, a child still has potential access to the other parent. Physical absence after a divorce is optional; physical absence after a death is final.

Another important difference is that, after divorce, the new stepparent is not usually expected to replace the biological

parent; this stepparent has some flexibility to develop a voluntary, friendship-mentor relationship with the stepchild. On the other hand, a stepparent after a death often strides into a quagmire of expectations by extended family, friends, church, and society to emotionally fill the void and assume the role of the deceased.

I grew up a half sister to four of my five siblings. My mother, Miriam, had three children under the age of four and was pregnant with her fourth when her thirty-four year old husband, Edmond, died of a heart attack. In order to obtain a degree which would better enable Miriam to provide for her family, she entered a one-year weekday anesthetist training program in Chicago while her children lived in Goshen, Ind. Her oldest three children stayed with a young couple from her church and attended preschool, and the youngest stayed with Miriam's sister's family. The family was together on weekends. A year later they moved together and Miriam began work as a nurse anesthetist.

Four years later Miriam remarried and her new husband, Bob, legally adopted her and Edmond's four children. Within three



"In a stepfamily, belonging is a key issue: Who is in and who is out? Who is real family?"

years they had two more children, of which I am the last. My oldest brother is 40 and I am 30 years old.

From my perspective, we are a stepfamily that seemed to minimize and overlook parts of our rocky, painful evolution as a unity, and glamorize other parts of it. We completely avoided the label of stepfamily; not until college did I realize that this description fit. Also, we seemed restrained in our demonstrations of emotions about our deceased family member, Edmond. Parts of our story which we and our community somewhat glamorized were the financial and practical suffering of Miriam as a widowed single parent and provider of four young children, and Bob's entrance into the family as a quiet hero.

The reasons for these minimizing and glamorizing behaviors make sense in the context of the early 60s and of our environment then. The term "stepfamily" connoted divorce and therefore sin in our small religious community, and "half-blood" relationships seemed suspect. I was defensive when townspeople asked questions such as, "Are you one of Bob's REAL children?" and "Are you just half sisters?" The theme of suffering is desirable and rewarded in Mennonite culture (note our thick book of heroes on the shelf: *The Martyrs Mirror*). Finally, the destructive paternalism and sexism in our society and community at that time reinforced a stance of pity toward Miriam (i.e., a woman should not have to have a career, be financially independent, or be head of a household) and of admiration and heroism toward Bob (i.e., man saves forlorn woman from fate and rescues four children from fatherlessness).

My family did not talk about our feelings related to Edmond's death, the loss of a father, the loss of a husband, the temporary loss of a mother and separation of siblings while she studied in Chicago, the addition of another father, the addition of two younger sisters....All of these issues were managed in the shadowy emotional underground.

There was a sense that to talk too much about Edmond or to express love and remembrance of him would somehow be disloyal to Bob, to hurt him. I do not think Bob would have been scarred. I think we wrongly assumed that he could not handle having Edmond's ghost comfortably included around our table, at our holiday gatherings, at family devotions, in our memories, rituals and life stories. Also, our Swiss community and father valued a "stiff upper lip." To call attention to one's physical or emotional pain was considered self-indulgent and weak.

As one of the two youngest siblings, I often felt I was tacked on to the family, and that the core family was Mom, Dad and the older four. The older four seemed vibrant, outspoken, sometimes troublesome, gifted intellectually, and basically loud. My sister and I, the last additions to the family, seemed small and silent by comparison. Imagine my surprise when a few years ago an older sibling told me she had always felt that my sister and I, Bob's biological kids, were the real family and that the older four were the outsiders! In a stepfamily, belonging is a key issue: Who is in and who is out? Who is real family?

Our family had regular contact with Edmond's family up until his mother (the older four's grandmother) died. I was about nine years old at the time. I have wonderful memories of visiting my stepgrandma and my stepuncles, aunts, and cousins in their matchbox town in Illinois. Well into the seventies, my stepgrandma's phone number was, "Blue 78, please, Operator." My stepuncle Don remembered my birthday every year with a crisp dollar bill and my stepcousin Dona, two years my senior, wore extremely cool velvet chokers. We had a ball, I loved them, and we stopped visiting after Grandmother's death.

When I was in my early teens, my family attended an extended family reunion on Edmond's side. I can remember the healing that I felt at being included in that gathering as part of that family, even though I was not "blood." For me it was a symbol of my connection to the important past of my older siblings and to their biological father.

Twelve years later, I again found healing when several of my stepuncles and aunts made it to my distant wedding, a loving symbol to me that I was part of them and that I counted and belonged. Here I was, a biological kid of both my parents, yet feeling unfortunately closed out of the historical lives of my stepsiblings and mother; longing to honor the connection to the blood kin of my older four siblings and to the former husband of my mother. If I needed a bridge to Edmond, how much more did my older four siblings need this connection?

I have learned that while physically death is final, emotionally death is not. Obviously, death of a spouse changes a family's physical and social relationships. However, death does not necessarily change a family's emotional relationships and configuration. Deceased spouses/parents are part of our life stories and these family ghosts are here to stay. We can choose to fight them away or accept them as part of our journey.

"Ironically, the less the family ghost is permitted to be a part of the family history., the less flexibility the stepparent has to forge his or her own relationship with the spouse and children..."

Ironically, the less the family ghost is permitted to be a part of the family history, the less flexibility the stepparent has to forge his or her own relationship with the spouse and children; instead, the stepparent is beset with all the unresolved issues that really belong between the deceased and the family.

On the other hand, the more the family and community can permit the ghost and the stepparent to coexist and not compete, the more freedom the family has to work through issues with the deceased and create a different and personal relationship with the stepparent. The challenge seems to be to stay out of anxiety-driven alliances with either the stepparent against the deceased, or with the deceased against the stepparent.

This challenge is to forge relationships with the family ghost AND with the stepparent that are emotionally connected and yet emotionally separate. These are relationships where the bonds are acknowledged and honored, yet without bondage; where there is a strong web of respect, yet the individuals within the web are free to act, choose and direct their life as each sees fit. It is a balancing act between ignoring the emotional connection (cut-off) and being consumed or dominated by it (fusion).

In summary, I think our family managed much of the pain of the loss of Edmond by distancing from it. We managed the anxiety of creating and being a reconstituted family by emotional distance and lots of sibling fighting. Our community and society reinforced viewing Miriam with distorted pity and Bob with distorted admiration.

Our behavior as a family was oriented toward survival. We wanted to protect each other, deflect social judgement by rejecting the stepfamily label, manage the pain and loss of a father and first husband, and become a new family. We each were doing the best we could with the resources and understandings available to us at the time. We fumbled, and we did some things well. As adults, we are free to look back, reflect, grieve, and then forgive the mistakes, rejoice in the healing, and move on.

Janet Liechty is a clinical social worker. She works in Washington, D.C., with individuals and families who are dealing with physical disabilities and challenging societal barriers.

Reference

Chadwick, Bruce and Tim Heaton, eds. *Statistical Handbook on the American Family*. Phoenix, Ariz.: The Oryx Press.

A Bittersweet Love Story

In the make-believe world of childhood, when I was angry at my mother I pretended that she was my stepmother, my "wicked stepmother." The role of stepmother was one that belonged in fairytales. The title alone was distasteful, and was assumed by a selfish, wicked, unloving woman. Now I am a stepmother!

My venture into stepmotherhood began three years ago when I married a man who had two teenagers, a 17-year-old boy and a 16-year-old girl. My relationship with my stepchildren is complex. At any time, the pendulum can swing from feeling very close to feeling very distant from each other. Because our story is still developing, I have found this article difficult to write.

My husband and I met four years ago at a family roller skating party arranged by a Christian Formerly Married Support Group. As a single parent for eight years, I was happy as a single person and comfortable in my role as a mother. My former husband had left us when my daughter was three years old. At the time, I was three months pregnant



"I can see that at times I was able to be their friend."

with my son who had been conceived in what I thought was a stable marriage. It took me eight years and a very special man before I even thought of remarriage.

John (not his real name) was also divorced. After 18 years of marriage, his former wife had left him and her children. When we met, John had been the custodial parent for five years. His former wife lived with various men during those years. Teenagers would have cramped her style.

John and I dated over a year before getting married. Our children all seemed eager for us to marry, but we felt all of us needed more time. The younger two expressed the need for a real dad. The older two did not think it would be a big deal. In spite of their approval, we felt it important that the entire family participate in formal premarital counseling. Each child had several sessions with a family counselor to help them work through their feelings. While these sessions were not a cure-all, they certainly helped us all adjust to our new roles. I would strongly recommend such an action to anyone considering marrying with children.

The relationships between all four children have pleased and surprised my husband and me. From the beginning they have referred to each other as brother and sister, never stepbrother or stepsister. We never suggested this language choice; they did it on their own. In spite of their age differences, from 17 to seven when we married, they act as siblings—sometimes very close and the next minute fighting.

After we married, my children and I moved into John's home and rented my house. Our house had four bedrooms, so someone had to share a room. (Prior to our marriage each had their own room.) Even before we had announced our intention to marry, my stepson offered to share his room with my son, despite the difference in their ages. Words can never describe how much this gesture meant to me. This arrangement worked until our oldest, now 21, moved into his own apartment.

Six months before John and I married, my former husband died from carbon monoxide poisoning. He left his wife, pregnant and with a two-year-old daughter. My children were crushed by his death. They loved their father, even though their relationship with him was not as close as I had wished.

John entered our marriage with the expectations of our children and community that he would assume the role of their father. Although this was not an easy task, he has done well in meeting those expectations. By the time this article is published, he will have completed their adoption.

I entered our marriage with different expectations. I saw my role of stepmother as one of being a friend. They had a mother, and I did not expect to replace her. Prior to our marriage, the children and I had developed a good friendship. I was a youth advisor at church and enjoyed relating to teens. I learned, however, that it is easier to be a friend of teens than to actually live with them!

As I look back over the past four years, I can see that at times I was able to be their friend. More often, however, I needed to be a parent. That is often an unpopular position. I was at times the wicked stepmother. As Pearl Ketover Prilik stated in her book, *Stepmothering—Another Kind of Love* (1990), "Stepmothers step in where others stepped out."

Although I knew that their mother chose not to live with them, I expected that she would be actively involved in parenting. She had other ideas. My stepdaughter has described her mother as her best friend, explaining that her mother understands why she wanted to drop out of college, move in with a boyfriend, buy a car out of her price range, or sleep until noon instead of looking for a job. She never says "NO, you may not do that." The responsibility for those unpleasant tasks fell on us.

It is interesting that during times of conflict, and nights without sleep, when we have finally said, "No, you may not



"...it took me a long time to realize that it was okay for me to go to our room to be alone. It was also okay for me to want to be alone."

do....", life with my stepdaughter becomes easier. In spite of what she says she wants, at 19 she is still happier when we set reasonable limits. When my stepdaughter wanted to move home from college, she called me at work to ask permission. It seemed important that I said "come home," before she talked with her father.

My stepson has little time for his mother except when he wants something. He manipulates his mother to buy him things, and to get his way when we say no.

My biggest difficulty in adjusting to my new home and relationships was in the areas of my role with the children, and the loss of personal space and freedom. During our first few months together the lack of personal space was most distressing. I needed a place where I could go and lick my wounds or simply meditate. Teenagers do not go to bed at nine o'clock. I was accustomed to my own private time after I had put the children to bed. A rocking chair in our bedroom finally solved that problem, but it took me a long time to realize that it was okay for me to go to our room to be alone. It was also okay for me to want to be alone. I have also grown to enjoy the 45-minute commute to work as personal space.

However, I have not solved the problem of loss of personal freedom. This has only become worse, as my younger two become active in various school and sports programs. I think I have accepted and adjusted to that loss. The area of role identity with my stepchildren is still evolving. Looking back, I see that I am another parent for them. They needed a mother figure in their life who really cared for them enough to set limits, or help them get ready for the prom, or go after them when they seem lost. I may never be their best friend, but they know that I am a concerned parent who loves them a lot and will not turn my back on them.

There are moments when I wish they were living somewhere else, BUT I can not imagine life without them or their challenges. When they are away, I miss them, for they are a very important part of my life. If I had the chance to do this again, I might wear heavier shoulder pads, and take some different approaches, but I would do it all over again.

The writer is a nurse educator and a member of a Mennonite congregation in Pennsylvania. She chose to publish this article anonymously.

Resources

Organizations

The Stepfamily Association of America
215 Centennial Mall South, Suite 212
Lincoln, NE 68508
402-477-7737

Parents Without Partners
7910 Woodmont Ave., Suite 1000
Bethesda, MD 20814

Second Wives Association of North America
720 Spadina Ave., Suite 509
Toronto, ON M5S 2T9

Books

Bel Geddes, Joan. *How to Parent Alone: A Guide for Single Parents*. New York, Seabury, 1974.

Explores the problems of single-parenthood adjustments—self-pity, guilt, loneliness, finances—and offers some solutions.

Berman, Claire. *Making It As A Stepparent: New Roles/New Rules*. New York: Doubleday, 1980.

Recommended as a "how to" book for stepparents.

Einstein, Elizabeth. *Stepfamilies: Living, Loving and Learning*. New York: MacMillan, 1982.

How to cope with both the larger issues and the day-to-day realities of stepfamily life by an author who is both a stepchild and a stepmother.

McClaren, Elaine. *Stages Every Stepfamily Goes Through: With seven checklists so you can tell where you are*. Hinsdale, IL: Classic Chronicles, LTD, 1990.

Visher, Emily B. and John S. Visher. *Old Loyalties, New Ties*. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1988.

Geared toward the clinician but easy to read and of interest to stepfamily members. Focuses on therapeutic strategies for working with stepfamilies. By the founders of the Stepfamily Association of America.

Women Reading Theology

MCC Women's Concerns is sponsoring a conference, "Mennonite Voices in Dialogue: Women Doing Theology," to be June 23-25, 1994, at Bluffton (Ohio) College. Six women biblical scholars and theologians are preparing papers for that event. We have asked several of those women to write short notes to our readers, suggesting reading you might do in preparation for the conference. Following is the first such note. Others will appear in upcoming issues of Women's Concerns Report.

In preparation for the discussion on "Atonement Theology" at the conference, I would suggest reading at either John Driver's *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* or Leonardo Boff's *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*. Neither are new, but both provide a substantial survey as well as critique of the traditional teachings on how the work of Christ is our salvation.

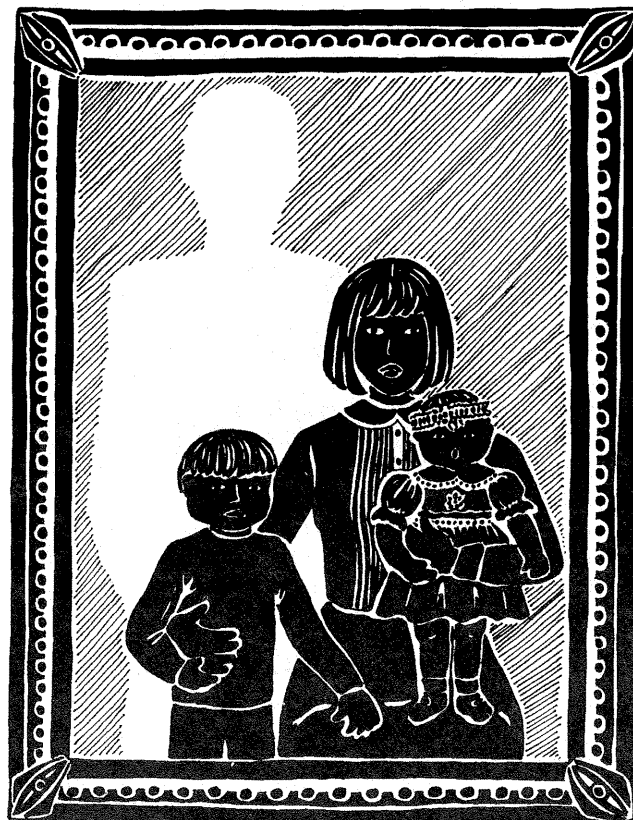
Driver, from an Anabaptist perspective, offers a detailed study of the various biblical images that contribute to an understanding of Christ's redemptive work. This enables him to show up the inadequacies of the popular theories of the atonement. Finally, he warns against any attempt to force the diverse biblical images into any one neat theory.

Boff, from a Roman Catholic, liberationist perspective, interprets biblical passages as well as the tradition in order to explore the meaning of the cross of Jesus Christ for contemporary faith and circumstances.

Both the Anabaptist and liberationist perspectives are appropriate and interesting starting points, I think, for contemporary Mennonite women attempting to understand and articulate, given our experiences, the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

—Rachel Reesor, Kingston, Ontario

Rachel Reesor will present a paper on atonement at the Women Doing Theology conference. She teaches theology at Queen's Theological College in Kingston.



Letters

The *Report* [on Women and Dress] is superb! Could I order more copies? Many of our women have come from second generation old-order background and struggle over how they had to dress as children.

—Eleanor Buskirk, Petoskey, Mich.

I am wondering if you have any copies left of the *Report* on Mental Illness (Jan./Feb. 1991). I am wondering too if this publication is still called *Women's Concerns Report*. Do you also produce a *Men's Concerns Report*? Can't it simply be for both male and female; we share many of the same concerns, and face many of the same difficulties—such as in the areas of mental and emotional health, not to mention

Women in Ministry

• **Kathleen Weaver Kurtz** was ordained June 6 at Northern Virginia Mennonite Church for ministry as a pastoral overseer.

• **Rosemary Widner** was ordained May 9 at College Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.

• **Libby Caes** was licensed and installed as associate pastor of West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship on May 9.

social and environmental concerns. How 'bout it?
—Joe Shenk, Harrisonburg, Va.

The March-April 1993 issue on Women and Dress leaves me with a number of questions. Whatever happened to the idea that we Mennonites could drop the applications of a certain time period in the past, but still keep the principles taught in Scripture?

Where is the unchanging biblical principle of modesty, simplicity and non-conformity when professing Christian Anabaptist Mennonite women, and even those who are pastors, wear ornaments dangling and sparkling from their ears? What's wrong with a woman's ears anyway, as-is?

What's wrong with a woman's eyebrows that she needs to suffer the torture of plucking them? What's wrong with her face that she needs cosmetics to make it look artificial? Do we really want to take our clues from this ungodly world that does not care a thing about Christ or the Bible or the Church? Do we really want to announce: "Look at me. I buy the line of immodesty, extravagance, and self-display"? Is that what life for a Christian Anabaptist Mennonite woman is about?

What's wrong with a woman's self-image that she must bedeck her body with all kinds of balls and chains? Isn't this one more way balls and chains bespeak bondage? Does emptiness inside prompt stacking on the stuff outside? To paraphrase a famous statement, "The woman who begins to be more serious within will live more simply without." Bishop Fulton J. Sheen once spoke of those women who are all vogue on the outside and all vague on the inside.

Instead of so much attention to style shouldn't we think more about a responsible lifestyle? Mother Theresa could teach us a thing or two. Imagine her with eye shadow, plucked eyebrows, layers of cosmetics, and wearing balls and chains and expensive clothes! That is not the way of a Christian woman with a consuming mission in this starving, warring world of mixed-up values. Rather than watching and copying the ways of a godless world shouldn't we ask, "What is the way our faith teaches us to go? Do we need no inner discipline? no accountability to each other in our churches?"

Shouldn't it be clear whether women professing a new way of life in Christ are following Hollywood or God's Holy Word? Shouldn't we be models of disobedience to the self-worshipping demands of fashion? Embracing life in this world is

contrary to Scripture. In his intercessory prayer before leaving this earth, Jesus Christ said of his disciples more than once, "They are not of the world any more than I am of the world." (Jn. 17:14-16).

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world," says Romans 12:2. "Women...dress modestly, with decency and propriety...not with gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds appropriate for women who profess to worship God," says 1 Tim. 2:9. The apostle Paul—the writer here—was not a woman-hater as some believe, but a freeing man who gave instructions to the man or woman who "proclaims God's message in public worship" (1 Cor. 11:4-5, TEV). He wrote of "those women who worked hard with me to spread the gospel" (Phil. 4:3, TEV). He listed Phoebe among the leaders of the church at Rome (Rom. 16:1). He was clear on Biblical equality in Christ: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

The best way for women to improve their looks, I believe, is by a pleasant, peaceful facial expression and warm love for others that springs from new life in Christ. That, along with good taste in modest clothing, produces a beauty absolutely unequaled.

—Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus, Harrisonburg, VA

News and Verbs

- "Women's Voices," a **new poster** featuring *Women's Concerns Report*, is included in the center of this issue. MCC has also produced a **new brochure on MCC Women's Concerns**. Copies of both are available without charge. Please post in your church, school or workplace. For brochures and extra copies of the poster contact MCC Women's Concerns, Box 500, Akron, Pa. 17501-0500, 717-859-3889; OR 50 Kent Ave., Kitchener, ON N2G 3R1, 519-745-8458.
- The Mennonite Church General Assembly, meeting in Philadelphia in July, passed a "**Resolution on Male Violence Against Women**," recognizing violence against women and urging congregations and church schools to study this issue.



Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Teresa Pankratz of Chicago. Please do not reproduce without permission.

- The Convention of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches, meeting in Winnipeg, Man., in July, **voted down a recommendation** of its Board of Faith and Life **that would have allowed individual congregations to call women as senior pastors**, if they choose. The convention vote was 61 percent against accepting the recommendation. According to a 1981 resolution, Mennonite Brethren churches invite women to use their gifts in the church in every function other than in the senior pastorate.
- “Understanding the Effects of the Missions Experience on **Missionary Kids**” will be the theme of a program to be October 29 at 7 p.m. at Hershey (Pa.) Brethren in Christ Church. Speaker will be David Pollack, well known for his work on this topic. The event is planned by an ad hoc committee of members of the Brethren in

Christ Church. For information contact Anita Musser Culp, 717-652-6657.

- Clarice Kratz began as half-time **church planting/evangelism** staff person for the Central District Conference January 1. Clarice and her husband Lawrence are co-pastors at Maple Avenue Mennonite Church, Waukesha, Wis.
- Some 50 Japanese women participated in the annual **Japan Mennonite Women's Conference** in Miyakonojo, April 28-29. Guest speaker Chizuko Katakabe elaborated on two themes, “O Ye of Little Faith” and “The Meaning of Trials.”
- Seeking young poets — The Second Mennonite Arts Weekend in Cincinnati, Ohio, Feb. 4-6, 1994, is asking for **young Mennonite poets**, elementary through high school, to submit entries for possible inclusion in a publication titled, *Living Mirror: Young Mennonite Poets*. Youth do not need to attend the conference to be published. Submit poems to Cynthia Staybrook, 233 Emming St., Cincinnati, OH 45219. Deadline: Nov. 20.
- “Carrying God's light: Strength for the Journey” is a 64-page booklet from WMSC and Women in Mission. It features an 11-part **Bible study on spiritual disciplines**.
- Almost 100 **Alberta women** gathered in Water Valley for an April women's retreat that featured storytelling and small group discussions. This was the first such retreat sponsored by the MCC Alberta Women's Concerns Committee.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committee strives to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures in which men and women can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Kristina Mast Burnett. Layout by Janice Wiebe Ollenburger. Correspondence and address changes should be sent to Kristina Mast Burnett, Women's Concerns, MCC, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

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